

THE EVOLUTION OF ARDMORE

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Cutting Firewood in the Black Hills

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Here is a story of a western opportunity, written primarily to interest people in the particular situation, but which sets forth the appeal of many similar places.

Starting a Town

THIRTY years ago, when the Burlington Railroad put through the rails that united Omaha and Kansas City with Billings and the West Coast, the little town of Ardmore, South Dakota, came into existence. A Presbyterian Sunday School missionary was the first Protestant minister to set foot in the town. He formed Sunday Schools here and there, and started little church organizations, one of which took root in the village. The country, however, was young; people came and went. The little church had its ups and downs and many phases of religious experience.

It is unnecessary to go into the vicissitudes of Ardmore church life. It is sufficient to say that with five hundred dollars provided by the Presbyterian Board of Church Erection the little congregation secured a house of worship. A permanent minister was obtained. On the basis of a settled charge, he took unto himself a wife, and came to the field, to find no parsonage in which to live. His board and room at the hotel amounted to exactly eighty dollars a month, and his salary was eighty-three dollars and thirty-three cents. One month of this was enough for the poor wife, and they returned to the place from which they came. Without a parsonage it was almost impossible to provide a permanent minister, and there was no Presbyterian pastor near enough to give part time to the field. In this predicament I was asked to give an evening once in

two weeks to Ardmore, and such other time as I could spare.

Pastoral Work

During the year 1921 I became Presbyterian pastor of the church on those terms. I found an incorporated town of two hundred and twenty inhabitants, dependent partly upon the farmers and ranchers of a wide shopping area extending from two to twenty-five miles, and partly upon a factory, whose blue-gray walls and towering smokestack give an air of business enterprise to the town. Ardmore is the home of "Refinite," reputed to be the finest water-softener in the world. It is made from a clay called "Ardmorite," which is not to be found anywhere else. In this situation I preached, visited among the people, and learned to know them. I took the boys in swimming, and did as much as I could to develop the church spirit—not much, of course, because my main work was at Edgemont, twenty-seven miles away.

Forming a "Community" Church

After a year thus spent, an exchange was effected whereby Ardmore took to itself the Congregational form of government, some other places becoming Presbyterian. Rev. Malcolm Dana, Director of Rural Work for the Home Missionary Society, was secured to help reorganize on a true community basis. The people were, in cowboy phrase, "raring to go," and Dr. Dana's vision of a community church, serving the town in every way, and being the center and focus of the better life of the region, was hailed with enthu-

THE HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY

siasm. A constitution was drafted and accepted. The people were solidly behind the movement. More than sixty signed a paper the very first day of the canvass, upon which appeared the simple heading: "Believing in Jesus Christ and His leadership, and wishing to unite with others in the service of my fellow-men and for mutual assistance in the Christian life, I hereby enroll myself as a Charter Member of the Ardmore Community Church."

A pessimist might say that an ephemeral excitement had struck Ardmore. A Christian must needs say that it is another illustration of the working out of God's spirit. A child may be a problem or a joy; it depends upon how much you love him. Ardmore may be looked upon as a tough nut to crack or an inspiring opportunity to accept, depending upon the fullness of the spirit of God in a man, or the lack of it. Business simply is not. The farmers are not making enough out of their low-priced products to pay their high-priced taxes. The great need of the newly-organized church seems to be money. The attractive lines of the rectangular building and pointed tower have become an eye-sore because of lack of paint on the walls. The furnace needs new piping and a new grate; the cellar needs new windows. A scoundrelly grafter put in, at the city's order, a new front sidewalk, charged four hundred and sixty dollars for it, and mixed so little cement with the sand that within a few months it has begun to crumble away. This bill must be paid. More than anything else the town needs a resident minister, and this will require money. A parsonage is needed to house the man of God. It seems wonderful to record that the problem has been turned into a challenge and a joy. At two or three church meet-

ings during the reorganization period, the collections went toward the paint fund, and fifteen dollars was collected. Two gallons of paint were donated. Dr. Dana raked up a lecture, "Bicycling through Scotland," and the free-will offering amounted to ten dollars more. When the weather becomes propitious there are plenty who will turn in and put the paint on. The ladies were given the job of paying for the sidewalk. They'll do it, that's all! The trustees determined to have an Every Member Canvass to see how much could be raised for a resident pastor. The budget was made, and put as low as possible, as the times are hard. Seven hundred dollars was asked in the letter that went to all potential subscribers. The teams went out, and before the afternoon was over, with some yet to see, nearly one thousand dollars was brought in in pledges.

"Who Will Go for Us?"

The new life is here, and new life must be nursed and fostered. Out from Ardmore are at least two or three places, eight, ten and fifteen miles away, where outposts should be founded, that the lonely rancher's life may be enlivened and his children brought into the Sunday School. The people of Ardmore yearn for a virile, systematic, all-around church life. Perhaps in the old home town the church meant a great deal to them. Out here the unkempt building, the struggling little Sunday School, the deadly apathy of indifference was sucking them down. Opportunity has knocked at the door; a new light shines in their eyes and a new hope is in their hearts.

There are no theological seminaries near to send forth students for the Sunday services. The Ardmore people cannot make bids for a preacher, and have a succession who put on

THE HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY

their best smile and pick their best sermon out of a barrel. Isolated, far out on the prairie, Ardmore must make its home missionary appeal, must send its challenge to the man who is willing to leave the beaten path, and venture into the untracked wilderness. There's stuff in Ardmore to make a great church. Can we find the man?